

The Impact of Traveller Interfamily Conflict on Individuals and Families

The Traveller Counselling Service
The Traveller Mediation Service
Exchange House Ireland



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THE RESEARCHER

This report was prepared and authored by Dr Sarah Sartori, a researcher and educator based in South East Technological University. Sarah has worked for over 15 years in the area of Adult and Community education. As a researcher, her conscious employment of participatory methodologies that values participants as experts, has led her to work with a variety of groups such as Travellers, people with convictions, refugees and the LGBTQI+ communities. She believes that research should disrupt the status quo and is best carried out with and by the communities for whom it is intended.

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ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

ACEs Adverse Childhood Experiences

EHI Exchange House Ireland

GTAG Garda Traveller Advisory Group

ITM Irish Traveller Movement

NTMHN National Traveller Mental Health Network

TCS Traveller Counselling Service

TMS Traveller Mediation Service

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

Inter-family violence is a pervasive problem affecting Traveller individuals and their families, with far reaching consequences for the entire Traveller community, that include mental health difficulties, imprisonment, injury and in some instances, death.¹ This research, that sets out to analyse the impact of Traveller inter-family conflict on individuals and families, is being carried out in response to a national conference in 2019 exploring Traveller inter-family violence and its impact on the mental health of the community.

The conference identified the need for an in-depth piece of research that would analyse the root causes of Traveller inter-family violence, its implications, and that would provide recommendations to address the issue.² The Traveller Counselling Service (TCS), Exchange House Ireland (EHI) and the Traveller Mediation Service (TMS) subsequently came together to commission a research project, with the objective of signposting resolutions to address the issue of inter-family conflict and support best-practice in terms of providing culturally inclusive support to families and individuals who are caught up in violent conflict. The aim is therefore, through deeper understanding, break down barriers so that Travellers can better access services that mediate against inter-family conflict.

RESEARCH AIM

The report you are reading lays out the context in relation to Traveller inter-family violence, how the research came about, as well as the steps taken, and the methodology used to explore participants' and stakeholders' experiences and insights.

The research aims to achieve three main objectives:

- Provide an in-depth analysis of the root causes of Traveller inter-family violence.
- Provide an in-depth analysis of the consequences of Traveller inter-family violence.
- Provide recommendations to address the issue of Traveller inter-family violence.

¹ Exchange House Ireland; Traveller Counselling Service; Traveller Mediation Service. (2019).

² Ibid

RESEARCH APPROACH

“...we’ve tried for 40 to 50 years of doing it everyone else’s way, let us try it our way.”

Research Participant

This research is likely the most in-depth study of Traveller inter-family violence to date and is necessary to foreground the extent of the issue, and to stimulate a solution-driven response to the problem. There has been specific criticism of past practice in Traveller related research, where ‘settled’ researchers declare themselves ‘experts’ on Travellers and where much of the literature drawn on, is from a ‘settled’ perspective. To prevent Eurocentric knowledge production, that has traditionally undermined the knowledge and experience of minority population groups such as Travellers, and perpetuated inaccurate stereotypes through the adoption of a pathologising lens,³ this research project has been co-created by the three Traveller organisations and the ‘settled’ researcher. Traveller voice and perspectives are centred, and conscious effort has been made to draw on literature and reports from Traveller activists, organisations and authors, as well as indigenous academic articles, in recognition of the expertise and knowledge inherent in the community. This approach is undertaken with the conscious aim of challenging colonised research methods that claim ownership of indigenous knowledge and deny Indigenous peoples’ claims to self-determination.⁴

Between April 2023 and May 2023, four focus groups were carried out; two in-person and two online with Traveller individuals, members of Traveller organisations, and members of the Garda Síochána, all of whom had direct/indirect experience of Traveller inter-family conflict. In total 38 people took part in in-depth research conversations to share either their insights or experience on the issue. There was an equal breakdown of male (19) versus female (19) participation. In terms of Traveller versus non-Traveller participation, vast majority of participation in the research was from Travellers, 32 participants, versus non-Traveller participation, six participants.

³ Thambinathan & Kinsella. (2021).

⁴ Ibid p. 1

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

“You’re seeing it on social media, like you know, batons, knives, slash hooks everything. You could see 20 fellas getting out of cars and attacking one site, they’re breaking up cars and mobile homes, and they don’t care who’s in them, they really don’t.”

– Research Participant

Only a minority of Travellers engage in inter-family violence, yet it is a conflict that negatively impacts on virtually all sections of the Traveller community,⁵ and that has evolved to typically involve weapons, ramming of vehicles, destruction of property, that includes the setting of sites and homes on fire, and can result in loss of life, severe mental-health difficulties, and families forced to leave their homes. Google ‘Traveller feud’ and you will instantly be brought to a spate of news articles, images and TikTok videos or “callouts,” provoking a member of a “rival” family clan into a fight. Historically linked to the culture of bare-knuckle fighting by which a male Irish Traveller upheld his family’s honour,⁶ and in the absence of an alternative system of ‘conflict resolution’ because of well-founded mistrust of the police and of the criminal justice system, such oppositions are misunderstood by some in the community as an element of Traveller culture.⁷

The phenomenon of inter-family conflict in the Traveller community is a complex mix of dynamics related to identity, power, economics and status and is influenced heavily by the context in which the conflict exists and external relationships.⁸ However, Traveller inter-family conflict is not just a Traveller issue, as it is linked to the systemic erosion of Traveller culture and the unacceptable treatment of Travellers by the settled majority,⁹ stemming from decades of racist and discriminatory policies, not least the 1963 Report from the Commission on Itinerancy, a report that problematised and criminalised the community’s culture and way of life.¹⁰ Horizontal, or lateral violence, where groups or individuals who have been colonised, marginalised or oppressed attack their kin (often for the pettiest of reasons), is a manifestation of internalised oppression and aggression,¹¹ and is reported to be common in Indigenous peoples the world over.¹² Communities with high levels of violence are also characterised by high levels of poverty, lack of adequate public services and educational opportunities, poorer health outcomes, asset and income inequality, while the underlying socioeconomic conditions in these communities perpetuate both violence and poverty.¹³

There is increasing recognition within the Traveller community that inter-family

⁵ Thambinathan & Kinsella. (2021). p. 5.

⁶ Patel et al. (2016).

⁷ Travers, S. D. (2016).

⁸ Midlands Traveller Conflict & Mediation Initiative Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath. (2012).

⁹ Exchange House Ireland; Traveller Counselling Service; Traveller Mediation Service. (2019).

¹⁰ Irish Traveller Movement. (2017).

¹¹ Freire, P. (1970).

¹² Whyman et al. (2021).

¹³ Buitrago et al. (2017).

violent conflict is leading to widespread intergenerational trauma, seriously damaging mental health and undermining progress in other areas such as education and accommodation.¹⁴ It can be difficult to accommodate families who are in conflict, impacting also on innocent families who might share the same surname. This is compounding the accommodation crisis already experienced by the community and impacting significantly on costs and resources including repairs to damage to property and security costs.¹⁵ On top of this, the issue perpetuates the stereotyping of Travellers as being violent, serving to contribute to the ongoing exclusion of Travellers and to the continuing high levels of discrimination experienced by the community.¹⁶

FINDINGS

The key findings in this research are summarised below and separated into essentially two categories – cause and effect, to help better understand the complex issue of Traveller inter-family conflict.

“It may start off for silly reasons, a silly fight or something stupid. But it escalates to the point where there’s awful hatred and trauma...for both sides, you know.”

– Research Participant

In relation to CAUSE, participants drew on the metaphor of the spiderweb to prompt responses as to the causes and links supporting the perpetuation of Traveller inter-family conflict. People spoke about the historical and intergenerational aspect to Traveller inter-family conflict, and how, regardless of the original reason behind the dispute, which in some instances might have been trivial, the ongoing violence perpetuates a cycle of violence and revenge attacks. Participants also spoke about inter-family violence originating as a result of the need for self-policing or as an internal method of settling disputes, driven by the poor disrespect by the Gardaí towards the community, that included blanket searches of Traveller sites. The issue of Traveller sites themselves, and how Traveller families are put living in deprived and cramped conditions, with little or no cultural regard to pre-existing family conflicts, was also referred to as a cause behind Traveller inter-family conflict.

In terms of DRIVERS, Traveller pride and family honour, was frequently referred to by participants as the reason behind retaliation or response to call-out videos, and social media and the extent to which inter-family conflict can be escalated due to the circulation of online content, was raised repeatedly as a driver of inter-family conflict.

¹⁴ Exchange House Ireland; Traveller Counselling Service; Traveller Mediation Service. (2019).

¹⁵ Offaly Traveller Movement.(2012)

¹⁶ Midlands Traveller Conflict & Mediation Initiative Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath. (2012).

“WhatsApp makes it so much easier or Facebook to reignite... because I can be drunk, pick up my phone, say a lot of hurtful things to make a video stand out and can’t take it back the next morning.”

– Research Participant

Criminality was spoken of by some participants as a cause of inter-family violence, again driven by the extreme poverty and deprivation experienced by the community, while racism, oppression, negative stereotyping and exclusion were highlighted repeatedly in this research as being a root cause of Traveller inter-family conflict, resulting in identity crisis, and feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.

“I mean, there’s nothing in my future, like it looks bleak. So, do you know what I mean? I don’t give a shit.”

Research Participant

In terms of IMPACT, participants in this research spoke of fires, destruction, stabbings, hospitalisations and death. All of the individuals recalled childhood memories of violence and conflict, with some recalling post-traumatic reactions. Participants spoke about how inter-family conflict had a negative impact on mental health, with some referring to the need for psychiatric support and services to deal with physical and psychological health conditions.

“I would have went through bad depressions, which I didn’t understand when I was 18 or 19. Where I would have to go to bed for a week and a half or two weeks. And then I’d get up and drink for a week. And then I’d feel worse.”

Research Participant

Aside from the impact on mental health, participants also spoke about the cyclical impact of the violence, and how it was passed from one generation to the next. For some participants, the consequences included imprisonment because of inter-family violence, and they spoke of the impact of imprisonment on their families. Some participants spoke of the negative impact of the cycle of violent conflict, both on themselves psychologically, and, on their day-to-day lives. Others, spoke of the impact on the community, and how the conflict affected the perception of Travellers in wider society, and undermined any chance of living a peaceful existence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nine recommendations are posed based on this research into the impact of Traveller inter- family conflict on individuals and families. These recommendations take into account participant and stakeholder experience and views, while also setting these, where possible, in an international context, where we see application of the proposed interventions.

1. Issue of a state apology to the Traveller community in view of discriminatory and assimilationist policies and practices: In particular this refers to the 1963 Commission of Itinerancy Report¹⁷ and the resulting policies that included the separation and removal of Traveller children into homes and institutions, segregated schooling for Traveller children, and were similar to those enacted against Aboriginal, Maori, Norwegian Sami, and First Nations communities. All of the aforementioned communities bar Travellers have received State apologies.^{18 19 20} This research contends that a State apology to Travellers is necessary so that the majority community can learn to accept how its own complicity in the treatment of Travellers has contributed to the creation of the social conditions, including Traveller inter-family conflict, that we witness today.
2. Targeted anti-racism policy: Traveller interfamily conflict, is explicitly linked to poverty and lack of opportunity available to Travellers, and Government and public sector bodies have an obligation to tackle and reduce the high levels of prejudice and discrimination faced by Travellers in Ireland.
3. This research echoes previous calls for an on-going and publicly available independent review of public sector bodies in relation to participation and outcomes for Travellers.²¹
4. Culturally specific policy change around Traveller accommodation: Accommodating Travellers next to families with whom there might be an ongoing or long-standing conflict can have devastating consequences. This research calls for culturally specific policy change in relation to Traveller accommodation.
5. Increase resourcing of targeted measures such as Traveller mediation: This research pointed to an overwhelming need to increase resourcing to organisations such as to the Traveller Mediation Service (TMS), that have proven effective at de-escalating Traveller inter-family conflict. This would include providing culturally specific training to Travellers in order to expand the services being offered, as well as the resourcing of early-intervention programmes, particularly those that work with youth, so that solutions are being offered prior to the escalation of a situation.
6. Increased resourcing for collaborative partnership projects with organisations such as the Gardaí: Internationally, the importance of strong police-community relations with Indigenous communities, has been flagged as central to improving the safety and well-being of all citizens. This research recommends more targeted community-policing initiatives to improve relationships between Travellers

¹⁷ Government of Ireland. (1963).

¹⁸ Dahlmann, L. (2023).

¹⁹ National Museum Australia. (2008).

²⁰ Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu. (2023).

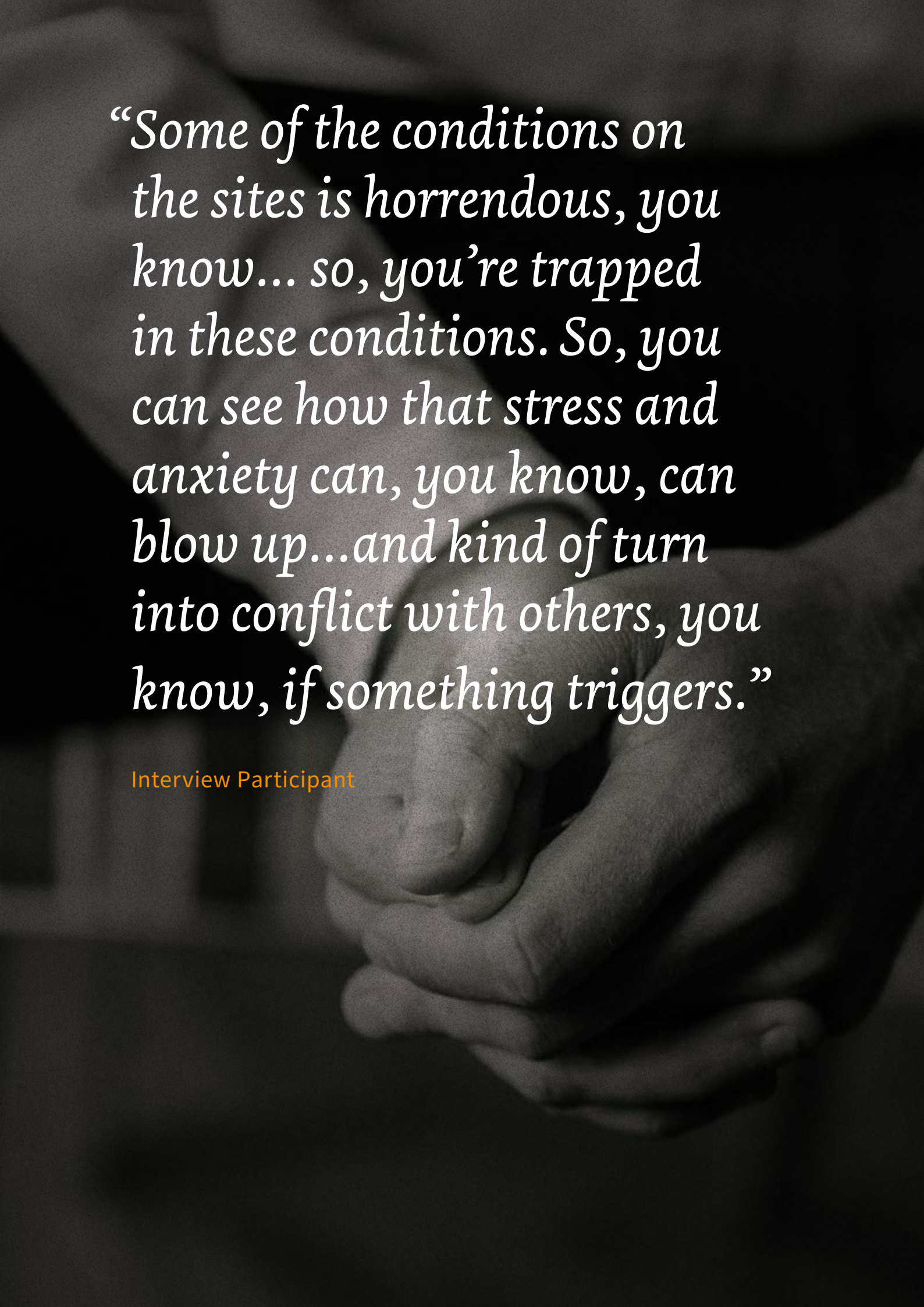
²¹ Baker et al. (2022).²² Haynes et al. (2021).

and the Gardaí, and for supporting more effective means of dealing with Traveller inter-family conflict to the benefit of all involved. This would include greater collaboration between Traveller organisations and the Gardaí, to work at building relationships of trust, in particular between young Travellers and the Guards.

7. Campaign to affect attitudinal change within the Traveller community: Many participants in this research recommended and called for an attitudinal shift within the Traveller community in order to resolve the issue of Traveller inter-family conflict, and emphasised a need for frank conversation within the community about how to address the violence. Some participants felt that campaigns in Traveller organisations, and campaigns in Traveller publications such as Travellers Voice magazine, that promoted the work of organisations like the Traveller Mediation Service, would be useful.
8. Tightening of social media laws in relation to Traveller inter-family violence: There was an almost unanimous call from Traveller individuals in this research, for a tightening of laws on social media, in relation to Traveller inter-family conflict. The changes brought about by the enactment of ‘Coco’s Law’ in February 2021, were referenced, that covers the distribution or publication of any threatening or grossly offensive communication about another person. Participants in this research called for a similar media campaign to put an end to threatening online videos, as actioned in the “sextortion” media campaign by An Garda Síochána.
9. Resourcing of culturally appropriate trauma-informed interventions: This research highlights a need for a culturally competent and trauma-informed service available to families who have been involved in inter-family conflict. This would need to include the proper resourcing of services provided by Traveller organisations to support families caught up in inter-family conflict, such as Exchange House Ireland and the Traveller Counselling Service.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the small population of Travellers in Ireland, and to protect participants’ identities, there are no identifiers other than Research Participant, Stakeholder Participant and Garda Traveller Advisory Group (GTAG) Participant. This limits our ability to be able to separate out responses in relation to female versus male responses, or for the reader to assess whether the response was as part of a focus group or as part of a one-to-one interview. It should also be noted that many Traveller individuals are also working for Traveller organisations, so therefore the differentiation between Research Participant and Stakeholder Participant is not completely clear-cut. Another limitation of the data set is that there may be potential bias in the data as the participants/participating organisations were recommended to the researcher by the organisations supporting this study.



“Some of the conditions on the sites is horrendous, you know... so, you’re trapped in these conditions. So, you can see how that stress and anxiety can, you know, can blow up...and kind of turn into conflict with others, you know, if something triggers.”

Interview Participant

